

PLAIN LANGUAGE, TRANSLATION AND IDIOSYNCRASIES OF THE LANGUAGE. CONTRIBUTION OF READING COMPREHENSION

Romina Marazzato Sparano^{1}*

*“A translation should say everything the original says,
ay nothing the original does not say,
and say it all in the correct and natural ways
afforded by the target language.”*

García Yebra, Metafísica de Aristóteles

Abstract

Drafting clear text requires much more than applying syntactic rules and prescriptive formulas, especially when issues arise from the need to express complex ideas or from syntactic (and, therefore, worldview) differences between languages. Eliminating jargon, limiting the number of words per sentence, and applying legibility formulas are inadequate strategies. A methodical reading of the source text, paying attention to the idiosyncratic structures used and information flow of the message, makes it possible to select idiomatic constructions and cohesion and coherence strategies that lead to improved reading comprehension. We will address, among others, differences in the expression of manner and result and in the use of clitics between English and Spanish, the use of nominalization for syntactic recasting, and the use of parallel structures and redistribution of theme and rheme as strategies for reorganizing information.

Key words: plain language, translation, reading comprehension.

¹ Master of Arts in Translation/Localization Management Program at the Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey. Member of PLAIN: Plain Language Association International, member of ATA: American Translators Association (Leadership Council of the Science and Technology Division). E-mail: romilism27@gmail.com

1. Introduction

Translation, understood as transferring the content of text in a source language to a target language, means to recreate the content in the target language and adapt the formal and cultural factors associated with the text. In this work, we set aside the dispute over domestication and foreignization (transparency or opacity of the target text) as cultural strategies for translation, in order to focus on the translation of informational text. There, the translator is responsible for transferring the content being, on one hand, conceptually faithful to the source text and, on the other, linguistically faithful to the target language.

The translator must, therefore, have domain-specific knowledge to meet the semantic needs of the transfer. The translator must also have an intimate knowledge of plain language strategies of the and idiosyncratic features of both working languages to meet the linguistic needs of the transfer. We will address structural issues that inform semantic interpretation and discuss writing strategies that help express ideas clearly.

The examples in each section appear in the following order: original in English, Spanish translation and revised version, signaling problematic translations with a question mark (?) and agrammaticality with an asterisk (*).

2. Plain Language

Plain language helps readers find, understand and use relevant information. It is based on five pillars: audience, purpose, structure, design, and, especially, content written in accordance with the principles of grammar, cohesion, and coherence.

Plain language arises as a response to bureaucratic, legal, and technical jargon, both in the public sector—to provide citizen access to information and services—and in the private sector—to respond to consumer needs and demands. Today it is also used to bridge the gap the so-called specific literacies (health literacy financial literacy, digital literacy, etc.) and to promote scientific communication, especially necessary to inform legislative policy.

3. Translation Difficulties

Translation difficulties arise both from issues in the writing of the source text as well as the possibilities of expression in the working languages. Writing must be clear and, for this, it must respond to three precepts: adequacy, grammaticality, connectivity. In the following example, each sentence is correct considered independently even

adequate the general public it addresses. However, when considered as a whole, there is a break in connectivity that the translator must resolve.

1. ● Guilt, vengeance, and bitterness can be emotionally destructive to you and your children. You must get rid of them.
 - ?La culpa, la venganza y el rencor pueden resultar emocionalmente destructivos para usted y sus hijos. Debe deshacerse de ellos.

The possibilities of expression within the language involve lexical and syntactic idiosyncrasies which convey specific worldview and are often difficult to translate. In the following example, the English sentence uses terms and structures unavailable in Spanish

2. ● VH Rescue Mission empowers people drinking their life away to develop the skills they need to lead a healthy life.
 - ?VH Rescue Mission empoderan a las personas que se beben su vida a desarrollar las prácticas necesarias para una vida sana.

3.1. Writing Issues

As mentioned, writing must follow three precepts: adequacy, grammaticality, and connectivity. Adequacy responds to factors external to the text, associated with four of the plain language pillars: audience, purpose, structure, and design. For drafting the content of text, writers must consider who the audience is, what they want to communicate, which is the best channel for communication, etc. These factors help determine the tone register for the text.

Grammaticality and connectivity directly impact the writing. Grammaticality has been the most explored precept in writing. Involves word order, semantic roles expressed in the sentence, and its syntax. We will see how syntactic recasting becomes cohesion strategy as it allows to manipulate permission flow without altering the semantic roles of event participants (Pinker, 2014, p. 35).

Connectivity is a function of cohesion and coherence in text. **Cohesion** is the visible glue of the text emerging through words, expressing “the continuity that exists between one part of the text and another” (Halliday & Hasan, 1976, p. 299). Table I presents a revised list classic cohesion strategies.

TABLE 1
Cohesion Strategies

Lexical strategies	Grammatical strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Pronouns• Repetition• Synonyms, hyponyms, hypernyms• Definitions• Explications• Word families and topical webs	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ellipsis• References (co/con-textual, cognitive)• Substitution and Nominalization• Recasting• Markers• Punctuation• Time, Aspect, Mood

Coherence is a less tangible aspect often described as the interaction writer that infuses the text meaning. It is true that readers expect seek coherence text. (Pinker, 2014, p. 141). However, while readers are always free interpret text, the writer's intervention is essential to build coherence into the text. In other words, textual coherence is an emergent property which allows the text to be interpreted as an informative unit.

Coherence emerges from the thematic unity linking nonadjacent sentences (*global coherence*, Mann & Thompson, 1988, p. 255), from logical and pragmatic connections between ideas often signposted cohesion strategies (*local coherence*, Zhang, Wei Feng, Qin, Hirst, Liu, & Huang, 2015, p. 6), from the *isotopies* and *semantic frames* (van Dijk, 1978, p. 21) expressing common threads the text with homogeneity through images, topical webs metaphors related to the main topic, and from the *information flow* (Thornbury, 2005, p. 38), by how themes and rhemes appeared in a sentence and are linked throughout the text (linear, constant, derived relationships, etc.).

3.1.1. Grammaticality

In terms of grammar, translators must be alert to faulty drafting of the source text. In the following example, the translation produces an error because the source does not clearly mark the relative clause "(that) knives are made from".

3. • Steel knives are made from is often high-carbon steel.
 - ?Los cuchillos de acero están hechos usualmente de acero duro.
 - El acero que se usa para forjar cuchillos es generalmente de alto contenido en carbono. / El acero más usado para forjar cuchillos es acero duro.

3.1.2. Connectivity

As mentioned, recasting strategies allow structural changes in the syntax of the sentence that do not alter the semantic roles of the participating entities. The strategies allow the writer to control the impact of such entities by manipulating when they enter the scene. Recasting strategies include, among others, *fronting*, *passive voice*, *cleft sentences*, and *subordination*. As it can be seen in the following examples, recasting helps convey shifts in meaning, process the relationship to the referent and its antecedents, lighten the text and straighten up information flow.

4. ● The young man had involuntary seminal fluid emission when he engaged in foreplay for several weeks.
 - ?El joven experimentó eyaculaciones involuntarias durante juego previo por varias semanas.
 - Por varias semanas, el joven experimentó eyaculaciones involuntarias durante el juego previo.
5. ● Carina Jones is a professional engineer. She is married and has two children. Carina is one of those women who have managed to achieve work-life balance.
 - Carina Jones es ingeniera. Está casada y tiene dos hijos. Es una de esas mujeres que han logrado conciliar trabajo y familia.
 - Ingeniera, casada y madre de dos niños, Carina John ha sabido conciliar trabajo y familia.

Translators must thought reference issues that the author may have missed, as in this example from *Angels and Demons* by Dan Brown:

6. ● A flawless tribute to water, Bernini's Fountain of the Four Rivers glorified the four major rivers of the Old World—The Nile, Ganges, Danube, and Rio Plata. *Water*, Langdon thought. *The final marker*. It was perfect.
 - ?Un tributo perfecto el agua, la Fuente de los cuatro ríos de Bernini glorificaba los cuatro ríos principales del antiguo mundo: el Nilo, el Granges, el Danubio y el Río de la Plata. "Agua", pensó Langdon. "El indicador final". Era perfecto.

This is a historic reference error, since Bernini designed the cited fountain to showcase the most representative rivers of the four continents where the papacy extended its reach, rather than rivers of the Ancient World.

Another important aspect of connectivity relates to semantic frames, which are conceptual webs with pragmatic rather than logical connections. For instance, the

semantic frame of breakfast in English brings together a table, cereal, scrambled eggs, and bacon, yet this might be inconceivable in other languages. Even within a single language, it is important to remember certain elements may be brought together by semantic frame but kept apart by another. For example, all colors belong in the semantic frame of art, however, all belong the following semantic frame:

7. ● Which element does not belong? Blue, yellow, magenta, cyan.

Here, the appropriate semantic frame is that of attractive color used to print colors.

Breaking the isotopy or shifting semantic frame of the passage also fuel humor. In this passage by Conrado Nalé Roxlo of *Los crímenes de Londres (The London Crimes)*, the narrator introduces for an element into the semantic frame of “breakfast.”

8. ● Holmes se sentó alegremente a tomar el desayuno. Su apetito era excelente, pues cuando yo estaba recién por mi tercera taza de café, él ya iba por la séptima inyección de morfina. [Holmes sat down merrily for breakfast. He had an excellent appetite, for when I was only pouring my third cup of coffee, he was already into his seventh injection of morphine.]

Finally, special attention directed to formation flow issues. Certain plain language initiatives promote formulas which are instituted for expressing complex ideas.

In the last example of the section, the passage is first translated based readability formulas and revised with information flow in mind.

9. ● *Original – English:* Participants assigned to a study treatment group will make 10 visits over a 7-week period. These visits will be paid for by the study. Regardless of group assignment, all participants will be contacted at 2, 6, and 12 months after the start of the study for about a 20-minute telephone interview. [Legibilidad: 10o grado]

● *Original – Spanish:* Los participantes asignados a un grupo de tratamiento del estudio deberán asistir a 10 citas durante un periodo de siete semanas. Estas citas serán pagadas por el estudio. Independientemente del grupo asignado, todos los participantes serán contactados a los 2, 6 y 12 meses después de comenzar el estudio para una entrevista telefónica de unos 20 minutos.

● *Version 1 – English:* If you are in a study treatment group, you will make 10 visits over a 7-week period. The study will pay for these visits. No matter which group you are in, we will call you for three phone surveys that will last about 20 minutes each. These surveys will take place 2, 6, and 12 months after you join the study. [Legibilidad: 6o grado]

- *Version 1 – Spanish:* Si usted está en un grupo de tratamiento del estudio, tendrá que seguir a 10 consultas durante un periodo de siete semanas. El estudio pagará por estas consultas. Sin importar el grupo al que esté asignado, lo llamaremos por teléfono para tres encuestas de unos 20 minutos cada uno. Estas encuestas ocurrirán los 2, 6 y 12 meses después de comenzado el estudio.
- *Final Version – English:* You will take three phone surveys at 2, 6, and 12 months after you join the study. These surveys will last about 20 minutes each. If you are in a study treatment group, you will also make 10 office visits over a period of 7 weeks. These visits will be free of charge.
- *Final Version – Spanish:* Deberá realizar tres encuestas telefónicas a los 2, 6 y 12 meses de haber comenzado el estudio. Estas encuestas le tomarán unos 20 minutos cada una. Si forma parte del grupo de tratamiento, también deberá asistir a 10 consultas médicas a lo largo de siete semanas. Las consultas serán gratis. [Legibilidad: 5o grado]

Writing formulas recommend eliminating jargon (from “regardless” to “no matter”), addressing the reader directly (from “participants” to “you”), and replacing passive voice. However, the revision made following these advice presents a confusing order: it first addresses some of the patients and then addresses all patients, it introduces additional participants (“we,” “the study”) unnecessary the context. In contrast, the final version organizes the text to barrel sequences theme-rheme-theme-rheme with the first one addressing all participants (“you” without conditions), and the second one addressing those assigned to a study treatment group (“you” with conditions or “if you are in a study treatment group”). Each sequence explains the action that will take place the cost for the patient first case time second money (turning out to be free).

3.2. Idiosyncratic Issues

Idiosyncratic issues include lexical and syntactic items particular to a language. At a lexical level, each language names the realities relevant for its culture, informed by the experience of the surrounding world, in terms both sensory and psychological, and the beliefs that are built from that experience. Thus, lexical differences can be classified into differences arising from sensory, psychological or ontological experiences. In Hawaii, for example, there are two different words for the smooth lava, “pahoehoe”, on which children can play, and the rocky lava, “a’a” which is very dangerous. The semantic scope of the word “caricia” in Spanish is different from that of the “caress” in English. In order to, the word “naz”, means

“the pride feel knowing that we are loved.” probably a universal feeling that is not lexicalized in all languages.

Ontological lexical differences crystallize the worldview of a language under harder to translate. In Chinese for instance the word “yuanfuen” means “the force connect us all” and is a concept profoundly linked to Buddhist practice.

Syntactic differences emerge because different constructs, and therefore different construals, exist in different languages. Perhaps one of the most salient differences between English and Spanish is the difference in frame (Talmy, 2000, p. 9). The concept of frame applies to the conceptualization and construction of complex events in which one main event frames a subevent in a relationship of *background* and *figure* (terms taken from Gestalt psychology).

3.2.1. Satellite and Verb Frame

The constructions most studied by Talmy are used to express result or path and manner. English is a **satellite** frame language because it expresses result through satellites or adjuncts to the verb, usually at verbs and prepositions. Spanish is a **verb** frame language because result is expressed in the main verb.

There are languages, called *equipollently* framed, which include both constructions. It is worth noting that English inherited from French a variety of verb frame constructions still in use today but which belong to more formal registers (consider “descend” vis-a-vis “go down”, or “postpone” vis-a-vis “put off”, etc.). A good indicator of the difference between satellite-frame and verb-frame languages is the number of prepositions of a language: English far surpasses Spanish in this.

Differences in frame generate a seeming word order inversion between languages, as English expresses manner first and then the result, while Spanish expresses result first and then manner, if it is expressed at all.

10. ● The doctor run out of his office.

● El médico salíó corriendo del consultorio.

This difference was observed in the 1950s by Vinay and Darbelnet (1977, p. 105), who described it as an inversion of the order in which the action is presented and called the technique to be applied for translating such expressions “*chassé-croisé*”.

However, it is more than just an inversion. In English, the expression of result on a satellite frees the framed verb from its semantic load, thus allowing to take on other aspects of the event, such as manner. This process is called **manner conflation** (Talmy, 1972, p. 242) and is the reason why English compound verbs carry a greater semantic load.

When translating this type of verbs with manner conflation, Romance languages lose their manner aspect (Slobin, 2000). In a study of translations of *The Hobbit* by R.R. Tolkien's, Dan Slobin systematically observed the loss of manner, in instances such as the following:

11. ● A bird flew into the house.

● Un pájaro entró a la casa.

Slobin points out that the verb frame languages ignore manner, because it is presupposed and do not need to clarify the direction or result in a satellite (that is why it is not acceptable “*salir afuera”). In the above example, it is assumed that the bird does not walk in but flies in, so, in Spanish, the manner is omitted. It is interesting to note that, when these result expressions are translated into English, manner is not recovered as often as it should be, and English translations tend to use verb frame expressions (Latinate verbs) that constitute a foreignization strategy. Conversely, domesticating the translation calls for the recovery of manner in satellite frame expression, even when the information is absent in Spanish, due to the same assumption mechanism.

12. ● Un pájaro entró a la casa.

● A bird entered the house. ● A bird got into the house. ● A bird flew into the house.

In conclusion, manner is omitted in Spanish, unless it becomes relevant in context.

13. ● The thief rubbed his prints off the door handle.

● ?El ladrón frotó el picaporte para borrar sus huellas.

● El ladrón borró sus huellas del picaporte ~~frotándole~~.

14. ● The nurse wiped the table clean / wiped the blood away.

● ?El enfermero le pasó un trapo a la mesa para limpiarla / para limpiar la sangre.

● El enfermero limpió la mesa ~~con un trapo~~.

We should point out that English presents locative alternations in which the same verb can take as a syntactic object either the entity that fulfills the semantic role of goal or the one that fulfills the role of theme. In Spanish, we tend to translate goal locative verbs with result verbs and theme locative verbs with manner verbs, because the former connote completeness, while the latter connote process.

15. ● The worker loaded the truck with sand.

● El peón llenó el camión de arena / con arena.

16. ● The worker loaded sand on the truck.

● El peón cargó arena en el camión.

This satellite frame idiosyncrasy of the English language allows it to build resultative constructions such as pure resultatives, “one’s way” and “time-away” constructions. These constructions often cause hesitation during translation, and can often be solved using a result verb.

17. ● He poured the cup full.

● Llenó la tasa ~~hasta el borde~~.

18. ● He snuck his way out of the country.

● ?Salió subrepticamente del país.

● Logró salir del país.

19. ● They danced the night away.

● ?Bailaron toda la noche.

● Se pasaron toda la noche bailando.

20. ● From the onset of infection, spirochetes inflict a generalized disease involving tissues throughout the entire body. Once they wiggle their way through the skin or mucous membrane, the spirochetes plunge into the lymph capillaries, where they are hurried along to the nearest lymph glands. There, they multiply at a rapid rate and work their way into the bloodstream...

● ?Desde el inicio de la infección, las espiroqueta provocan una infección generalizada que afecta todo el cuerpo. Una vez que se introducen a través de la piel o las membranas mucosas, las bacterias se sumergen en los capilares sanguíneos, que las llevan rápidamente a los nódulos linfáticos más cercanos. Allí se multiplican con rapidez y pasan afanosamente al torrente sanguíneo.

● Desde el inicio de la infección, las espiroqueta provocan una infección generalizada que afecta todo el cuerpo. Una vez que logran penetrar la barrera de la piel o las membranas mucosas las bacterias ingresan a los capilares sanguíneos que aceleran su pasaje los nodos los linfáticos más cercanos así se multiplican rápidamente comienzan a invadir el torrente sanguíneo.

3.2.2. Nominalization

Nominalization consists of an abstraction of the action that subsumes the agent and the event in a single entity: subject and verb are merged into the noun that expresses the abstraction. Its function is to provide lexical density to the

written text which, in contrast to speech, is planned rather than extemporaneous, has a compact rather than loose structure, and is the product of invisible revisions in the final version rather than a process of synchronous revision.

Nominalization eases the rhetorical manipulation of text, because it allows to reengineer chronological sequences into logical ones. Nominalization also serves as a cohesion strategy, as one of the cohesion mechanisms which, like reference and substitution, allow us to pick up information expressed in previous sentences.

In English, nominalization is not as robust a cohesion strategy as in Spanish. In Spanish, both result and manner verbs lend themselves to nominalization (from “bailar” to “baile”, from “salir” to “salida”). In English, the nominalization of result verbs usually comes from more formal verbs, creating a gap between the usual phrasal verbs and the nominalizing noun because they do not share a morphological root: “entrance” comes from “enter” and not from “come in”, for example.

We can therefore propose the use of nominalizations in Spanish as alternatives to cohesion strategies in English such as repetition and pronouns that read unnatural in a Spanish text.

21. ● The senator tiptoed his way into the chamber. But he did not go unnoticed.
 - El senador entro sigilosamente al recinto, pero su entrada no pasó desapercibida.
22. ● The goal of marketing and recruiting in higher education is to pump up admissions. With higher admissions, colleges and universities also seek to bring up the quality of new freshman classes.
 - El marketing y del reclutamiento en educación superior tienen por objeto aumentar el número de inscripciones. Junto a este aumento, las universidades también buscan mejorar la calidad de los ingresantes.

3.2.3. Dative Clitics

The clitic system of Spanish is much richer than in English. In this brief article, we will focus on **dative clitics**. Datives, and their multiplicity of senses, lend themselves as useful tools when translating a variety of English grammatical resources like prepositional and possessive phrases. In Spanish, datives can be classified into three categories: *directional*, *possessive*, and *ethical* (Stamboni & Hospital, 2014). In contrast, the English dative is used only in a directional sense: it connotes possession by a human participant in transfer events expressed by a ditransitive verb, as in the following example:

23. ● The cashier smirked at me while she gave me my change. (directional + human directional).
- La cajera me sonrió con desprecio mientras me daba el vuelto.
24. ● Wash your hands before treating your child's wound. (possessive + possessive)
- Lávese las manos antes de tratarle la herida a su hijo.
25. ● The boy won't eat for me. (ethical)
- El chico no me come nada.

Let us focus on the ethical dative for *it* has been the less explored dative use. Ethical datives can express two senses: *intensifier* or delimiter. The **intensifier** dative is co-referential with the subject, but not duplicable, and responds to the presence (implicit or explicit) of a semantic threshold.

26. ● I watched the whole entire season in one sitting! [semantic threshold]
- ¡Me miré toda la temporada de un tirón (*a mí mismo)!

The **delimiter** dative may have a *malefactive* or *benefactive* sense, is not co-referential with the subject, and can even co-occur with an argumentative dative (a dative that expresses a required participant in the event). In English, these senses are usually expressed by a prepositional phrase headed by "for" in benefactive senses and "on" in malefactive senses and followed by the addressee, as can be seen in the following examples:

27. ● Would you make the baby's dinner for me while I take a shower?
- ¿Me le haces la comida al pequeño mientras me doy una ducha?
 - I yelled, "I'll call the police on you!" But I was paralyzed.
 - Grité: "¡Te voy a llamar a la policía!". Pero me quedé paralizada.

Finally, it should be noted that, given the multiple senses of the dative in Spanish, it is possible to use the same structure to translate different phrases from English:

28. ● His sunglasses broke while he was skiing.
- Se le rompieron las gafas esquiando. (interpretación posesiva)
29. ● The sun glasses broke on him while he was skiing.
- Se le rompieron las gafas esquiando. (interpretación ética malefactiva)

4. Conclusion

In this brief article, we have focused on writing techniques that help create clear, fluent and domesticated translations. Our intention is not prescriptive, we simply present them as tools available for the drafting of a robust text.

We proposed a revision of plain language guidelines in order to solve grammar and connectivity issues. In particular, for articulating complex ideas, we explored the use of cohesion and coherence strategies. Plain language initiatives often advise eliminating jargon, limiting the number of words per sentence, and applying readability formulas. However, we have shown how the methodical reading of the text that focuses on isotopies and information flow allows for a more sophisticated final version of the translated text.

We also addressed idiosyncrasies of English and Spanish that translators should be aware of. We looked at the expression of direction differs in both languages, English being a satellite frame language and Spanish a verb frame language. This difference leads to frequent manner conflation in English, absent in Spanish, not because it is lacking in the unfolding or perception of the event but because it is presupposed. We explored how verbs easily lend themselves to nominalization in Spanish and that this becomes a valid cohesion strategy that replaces tiring repetitions and pronominalizations. Likewise, we saw that the multiplicity of senses of dative clitics allow for the translation of a range of English grammatical resources including possessives, directional prepositional phrases and benefactive and malefactive expressions.